

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 19th Sunday after Pentecost, Oct. 19, 2014

Render Unto Caesar
Dr. Kenneth Humphreys
October 19, 2014

Matthew 22:15-22

The day before I began writing today's message, I had received my real estate tax bill and cringed a bit at the amount of money I had been assessed. The bill was substantially higher than it had been when we bought our home as the result of tax increases over the years and reassessments of property values in the area.

I thought about the services of government as I wrote the check to pay those taxes and had to agree that what we receive for those tax payments was really a bargain overall --- police and fire protection, ambulance service if it is ever needed, parks and recreation, an excellent public library, and a lot more, all for a few dollars a day. It is a pretty good deal when you look at it that way.

That however was not the attitude of the Pharisees who were trying to trap Jesus in today's scripture reading from Matthew. You are all familiar with the story which also appears in Mark 12 and Luke 20.

The Pharisees have sent some of their disciples and some Herodians to question Jesus. You may not be familiar with who the Herodians were. They are mentioned only in three places in scripture, today's reading, the parallel story in Mark 12, and another reference in Mark 3.

The Herodians were supporters of the family of Herod the Great, the Roman client king of Judea who had unsuccessfully attempted to kill the infant Jesus. When Herod died, his kingdom was divided by Rome among his three sons Archelaus, Philip and Herod Antipas. Philip had been given the territories east of the Jordan River. Herod Antipas was given Galilee and Perea and Archelaus was initially given Judea. Subsequently Pontius Pilate became the prefect of Judea, and we all know who he was.

The Herodians who came to question Jesus were primarily supporters of Herod Antipas who were angry that the kingdom had been divided and not given in its entirety to Herod Antipas. They wanted to regain Judea for Herod Antipas and were very angry with Rome that Pilate now governed Judea.

The Herodians disagreed with the Pharisees on many religious and political issues but here they joined together to combat what they thought was a threat to their power bases --- actually two threats, Rome and Jesus.

There was little they could do about Rome but that pesky rabbi from Galilee was another thing. They hoped to trap Jesus into either advocating against Rome or by arousing the anger of the people against him. In the latter case the people would hopefully turn against Jesus. In the former case, Rome would act against him. So they ask Jesus, *"Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?"* (NIV)

The question was a classic Catch-22.

The taxes in question were a huge burden on the people of Israel, but it was not all of Rome's making. The Herods paid tribute directly to Rome and collected additional taxes to compensate for what they paid. The prefects in Judea and Samaria collected land and poll taxes for Rome and the Jewish religious authorities collected even more taxes for the temple and for institutional expenses.

How high were these taxes? According to the Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, *"... a Jewish family paid approximately 49 percent of its annual income to these various taxes: 32 percent to the Romans (19 percent on crops; 13 percent on sales, income, and other taxes), 12 percent to Jewish taxes (8 percent on crops and 4 percent on temple and sacrificial taxes), and 5 percent on forced extractions from corrupt officials."* Comparatively speaking, we don't have it so bad after all.

Jesus' response to the question, *"Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?"* (NIV) was a classic rebuff to his questioners, *"Show me the coin used for paying the tax."* (NIV)

What they showed him was the denarius, a small silver coin which, back then, was about a day's wage for the average person. He looks at it and asks whose face is on it and they reply, "Caesar's." And Jesus says, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." (NIV) In the King James Version of the Bible, the words are, "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's."

The Herodians are stopped dead in their tracks with this answer. They have no rebuttal.

A denarius at that time was inscribed in Latin with the words, "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus." The reverse of the coin depicted Pax, the Roman goddess of peace. Jesus tells them to give back to Caesar these coins which reflect false gods and to give the one true God that which is God's. This is perhaps the first clear admonition for the separation of church and state.

A couple of years ago I attended a seminar given by the Board of Pensions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). It was entitled "Render Unto Caesar" alluding to today's scripture passage and to the necessity to support both government and the church, specifically in the case of the seminar, church workers. That is not a hint folks. You do well by me.

The point is that everyone has the obligation to support the necessary functions of government (graft and corruption excluded of course) and also the obligation to support the work of God.

As the Zondervan Commentary expresses it, "*Those who respond to the invitation to the kingdom of heaven will continue to have obligations to the governing authorities of this world, a fact that later New Testament writers emphasize while living under oppressive authorities. God as Creator has sovereign right over all creation and everything in it, which implies that even what belongs to Caesar is only his in a secondary way. Allegiance to God takes precedence over allegiance to Caesar (or to the city and county, Raleigh, NC or Washington, DC), especially when Caesar attempts to usurp allegiance to God's will. Jesus may have implied further that while the 'image' of Caesar was stamped on coins, humans bear the image of God from creation, and therefore God has claim on all that any person has or is.*"

Perry Biddle stated that Jesus' answer to the Pharisees and Herodians effectively evades the question rather than answering it. He doesn't say what is right or the issue of whether or not Caesar has the right to rule. *"We cannot draw up a political theory regarding separation of church and state from the answer Jesus gave. We can be sure Jesus did not intend to divide the world into two spheres: one belonging to Caesar and one belonging to God. For in his teaching, God is the creator and ruler of all."* (Perry H. Biddle, Jr., Preaching the Lectionary" A Workbook for Year A, Westminster/John Knox Press)

Amen!